

Upper Mississippi River

National Wildlife Refuge Complex

Comprehensive Conservation Plan Update

December 2002



Photograph Copyright by Sandra Lines

Inside This Update

Greetings from the Refuge Complex Manager / 2
What You Said in Comment Sessions / 3
Next Steps / 7

Contact Us

Mailing Address: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge,
Attention CCP
51 East 4th Street, Room 101, Winona, MN 55987.

Telephone: 1-888/291-5719 or the Federal Information Relay Service at 1-800-877-8339.

Internet: <http://midwest.fws.gov/planning/uppermisstop.htm>

Greetings from the Refuge Complex Manager

There is an old saying that if you have no idea where you are going, any road will get you there. Most of us at times wish our own lives were so carefree. But in truth, we must all plan the days, weeks, months, and years which collectively make up our lives and affect the people around us we care about. If you care about someone, or something, it is inherently human to identify needs, sort alternatives, and chart a course.

In my short time as the manager of this incredible place called the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, it is obvious that thousands and thousands of people care about this refuge. As your stewards for this refuge, it is important that we give careful thought to how we manage it now and in the future. Thus the need, and charge from Congress, that we prepare a Comprehensive Conservation Plan to guide administration, management, and use of the Upper Mississippi Refuge for the next 15-20 years. We will also be doing a plan for three other special places administered along with the Upper Mississippi Refuge: Trempealeau and Driftless Refuges and the proposed Lost Mound Refuge.

Your involvement is vital to this effort. We have already had a round of public input meetings to help us understand what issues are foremost in the mind of the people we serve. There will be other meetings, and ample opportunity over the next year or two to provide additional input. As stewards, we will have to make choices and decisions, some of which will make people happy and others not so happy. But we will listen to your point of view, and share our point of view, as we craft the goals, alternatives, objectives, and strategies that will make up the heart of the Plan.

Along with helping to manage the planning process, part of my job as manager is to help articulate a vision for the Upper Mississippi Refuge. Many key words swirl in my head: breathtaking, beautiful, sustainable, ducks, eagles, herons, swans, mussels, fish, plants, pools, marshes, islands, forests, hunting, fishing, trapping, birdwatching, camping, navigation, health, diversity, citizens, agencies, States, Congress, watersheds, communities, economies, awareness, threats, and on and on.

But if I had to boil it down to its simplest terms, this is what I would like to see: I want to see us conserve an Upper Mississippi River Refuge Complex that is beautiful, healthy, and supports an abundance and diversity of native fish, wildlife, and plants for the enjoyment and thoughtful use of current and future generations. It is that simple, and that complex.

Thank you for your continued interest in your National Wildlife Refuge System and the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge Complex. I look forward to your continued involvement as we move forward with the plan.



Don Hultman

Public Involvement is First Step in Comprehensive Conservation Planning

Planning for the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge Complex began with the heart of comprehensive conservation planning - listening to people who care about the Refuge Complex and its future management. Twelve meetings were conducted in August and September along the length of the Refuge Complex to give people an opportunity to voice their thoughts on refuge management and issues that should be considered in the comprehensive conservation planning process.

The gatherings included both an open house and a facilitated session in which a microphone was passed around the room and participants were invited to state the primary issue that they felt should be considered in planning. In most sessions, participants had the opportunity to state two to three issues. Flip charts were placed in front of the room for five broad categories of comment: Wildlife/Habitat issues; Recreation; Hunting/Fishing; Closed Areas; and Other Issues. The categories changed slightly for some districts of the

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Winona, LaCrosse, McGregor and Savanna). The facilitator asked the speaker to identify in which category the comments should be recorded. At the conclusion of the facilitated session, people were given three "sticky dots" and asked to prioritize the issues by placing dots beside the issue that most concerned them.

Issues described in those meetings are summarized here. To see a complete list of the comments at each meeting, please visit the planning website for the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge Complex at: <http://midwest.fws.gov/planning/uppermisstop.htm>.

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge



Savanna District

The series of meetings began on the south end of the Complex. Meetings were held in Clinton, Iowa, on August 27, Thomson, Illinois on August 28, and Dubuque, Iowa, on August 29.

Participants in those meetings identified hunting and fishing issues as their primary interest. The issue of greatest concern was the traditional use of permanent blinds. Other issues included the Potter's Marsh Blind Management Zone, continue to allow hunting and fishing opportuni-

“Loss of backwater due to sedimentation is resulting in decreased fish and duck populations and, therefore, hunting and fishing opportunities (specifically Pool 13).”

Meeting Participant

ties to the greatest extent possible, consider rotating Closed Areas to allow waterfowl hunting, and consider locating new facilities (e.g., the bike trail and handicapped fishing platform) to areas where hunting opportunities are not subsequently restricted.

Among wildlife/habitat issues that participants identified as priorities, the highest ranking issues concerned sedimentation: “Loss of backwater due to sedimentation is resulting in decreased fish and duck populations and, therefore, hunting and fishing opportunities (specifically Pool 13).” People also expressed interest in providing a diversity of habitat for plants and animals and controlling invasive species.

Recreational use issues included garbage left by campers and a desire to see personal watercraft use restricted outside of the main channel. Issues related to closed areas included a desire to see parts of currently closed areas opened for hunting and fishing. Participants said that there is a greater need for environmental education projects to keep the public informed on River issues.

The top ‘Other Issues’ issue related to funding: “Concern that federal government isn’t financially committed to implementation of the plan. The Refuge is not even supported adequately now and sufficient funding is needed to implement plan and achieve the vision and goals of the Refuge.”

McGregor District

Meetings were held in Lansing, Iowa, on September 10, Elkader, Iowa, on September 11, and Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, on September 12. Among wildlife/habitat issues, “Control erosion on islands by placing riprap rock and fill behind to build island back,” emerged as a priority issue. “Maintain and improve existing and future sandbars for recreational use,” also was the top ranked recreational use priority. Land acquisition was also cited as a priority among ‘other issues’: “Increase FWS land purchase areas to the entrance of St. Croix River and half mile from the water to the bluffs.”

In the hunting and fishing category, the priority issue was: “Implement periodic drawdowns (on a rotating schedule of pools as needed) to improve fish and wildlife habitat.”

LaCrosse District

The next series of meetings included gatherings in Stoddard, Wisconsin, on September 17, Brownsville, Minnesota, on September 18, and Onalaska, Wisconsin, on September 19. In that series under the hunting/fishing priorities, trapping was the biggest issue for participants: “Do not lose trapping program; keep as is on the Refuge.” The next highest ranked hunting/fishing priority was: “Leave hunting and fishing privileges as they are, especially with regard to when and where we can legally hunt and fish.” Wildlife



Photograph Copyright by Sandra Lines

priorities were led by concern related to exotic species: “Better control of exotic species (plants, birds, animals, fish) – this presents one of the greatest threats to native species.” Participants also ranked exotic species as the highest priority among habitat issues: “Invasive species need to be addressed (specifically purple loosestrife); introduce purple loosestrife beetle into Rush Creek Bottoms.” Shoreline erosion also received a high ranking among habitat issues.



Photograph Copyright by Sandra Lines

Among recreational issues, the highest ranking priority concerned dogs on the refuge: “Rewrite dog regulation to allow traditional use of dogs with restrictions to protect resource and people.” Participants also expressed an interest in reducing/limiting the use of “.noisy speed toys (jet skis, runabouts, snowmobiles and 4-wheelers).”

Two issues tied for highest priority in the ‘Other Issues’ category: “Continue/increase environmental education refuge-wide, including visitors centers in each district for information dissemination,” and “Legislative mandates need to be accompanied by sufficient funding (need money to implement the CCP) and regulations need to be spelled out in detail in the final plan to avoid misinterpretation.”

Winona District

The final three meetings were conducted in Wabasha, Minnesota, on September 24, Winona, Minnesota, on September 25, and Centerville, Wisconsin, on September 26.

Wildlife/habitat issues were led by concern for the state of the Mississippi River: “Return the river to its natural state by removing locks and dams.”

“Continue/increase environmental education refuge-wide, including visitors centers in each district for information dissemination.”

Meeting Participant

Other high-ranking issues included reducing the impacts of invasive species on the refuge and implementing no-wake zones in side channels, backwater areas and sensitive shoreline areas of the main channel. Participants also said that reducing the impact of sedimentation on habitat and improving water quality are issues that should be addressed in planning.

The highest ranking recreational issues suggested limiting motorized vehicles on the river. “Set aside some areas as non-motorized areas in the refuge” and “Restrict use of airboats, personal watercraft and high boat wakes in backwaters and side channels” each received high ranking from participants.

On the topic of closed areas, participants were concerned about habitat on Pool 5A: “Consider changing closed area boundaries on Pool 5A to include better habitat and food sources for migrating waterfowl.”

The highest ranking hunting/fishing concern was: “Maintain the current level of hunting and fishing rights.” Participants also said that the Service must ensure that hunting and fishing remain a primary wildlife-dependent recreational use on the refuge.

In other issues, participants ranked “Need equitable federal funding for recreational support equal to that for commercial navigation” as the highest priority. It was closely followed by “Need sediment management in the river valley and watershed.”

“Expand habitat management for grasslands, prairies, woodlands, riparian areas, etc.”

Meeting Participant

Lost Mound Refuge (proposed)

The priority issue identified for the proposed Lost Mound Refuge (the former Savanna Army Depot) was for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to formally approve creation of the Refuge.

Driftless Area Refuge

Of the issues related to the Driftless Area Refuge, the one participants saw as being of most concern related to acquisition of land: “Expand lands to include more buffer for protected areas.”

The meeting in Elkader focused on the Driftless Area Refuge, where the top priority for participants was habitat management. “Expand habitat management for grasslands, prairies, woodlands, riparian areas, etc.,” one participant said. “Bring boundaries out to roads, railroad tracks or similar recognizable features,” was also selected as a priority. Minimizing impacts to habitat areas was also cited as a priority.

Environmental education and outreach were also considered priorities by meeting participants.

Trempealeau Refuge

A strong interest in continuing trapping on the Refuge emerged as a concern for participants in the Centerville, Wisconsin, meeting that centered



Photograph Copyright by Sandra Lines

on the Trempealeau Refuge. Participants expressed interest in expanding bicycling trails and designating new horseback riding trails. Some participants said that the Refuge's waterfowl hunting program should be expanded to include all hunters, not just disabled hunters.

In wildlife and habitat, there was interest in protecting habitat for threatened and endangered species. Other people said that the Refuge should consider both adjacent areas that affect water quality and how the Refuge may impact neighboring farmland.

In other issues, participants said that environmental education should be increased and the Refuge should enhance partnering efforts with other units of government.

Information Sessions on Closed Areas Slated

The Fish and Wildlife Service will offer presentations on public use concerns, biological needs, and research. This informational presentation on Closed Area issues and concerns will be held in the LaCrosse, Wisconsin, area in late February. The time and location will be announced through local media and our web site (<http://midwest.fws.gov/planning/uppermisstop.htm>).

‘Manager for a Day’ Workshops Slated

Refuge Complex staff and regional planners have begun sorting through the comments and have identified some issues that will be the subject of workshops early next year. The workshops will give Refuge Complex staff an opportunity to present the concerns they see as well as seek additional public input on management issues. We expect the workshop format to offer opportunities for participants to be ‘managers for a day,’ with small groups developing alternatives that address various issues and that can be used to resolve these issues. The workshops will be facilitated by the Conservation Breeding Specialists Group (CBSG), the same organization that facilitated sessions during the open house meetings.

Workshops will focus on topics that surfaced during the first round of public meetings and internal discussions, including:

- closed area use and management;
- recreational uses, including traditional uses such as hunting, fishing, camping and boating as well as hunting blinds, dogs and beaches; and
- habitat concerns, including invasive species, pool management, and the Environmental Management Program.

The workshops will be open to the public, however we ask that participants plan to attend for the full day. Anyone planning to attend is asked to inform the Refuge Office at least 7 days prior to the workshop of their choice. Please call the Refuge Office at 1-888/291-5719. Participants will be involved in identifying issues and developing management alternatives in both small-group sessions and full group sessions throughout the day.

Although we would like to be able to provide lunch at no cost to participants, the federal government is prohibited from purchasing meals for meeting participants. We will have lunches available at a reasonable cost

Workshops for the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge will be held on the following dates:

Saturday, January 4 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Prairie du Chien High School, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin.

Saturday, January 11 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the House of Events, 108 Main Street, Savanna, Illinois.

Saturday, March 8 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Winona Middle School, Winona, Minnesota

Saturday, March 22 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Eagle Bluff Elementary School, 200 Eagle Bluff Court in Onalaska, Wisconsin.

Saturday, March 15 A workshop focusing on Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge is scheduled from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Trempealeau Middle School in Trempealeau, Wisconsin.

Thursday, February 20 A workshop focusing on Driftless Area National Wildlife Refuge is scheduled from 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at Central State Bank in Elkader, Iowa.

Notices of the workshops will be posted on the planning website (<http://midwest.fws.gov/planning/uppermisstop.htm>) prior to the workshops.

Following the workshops, Refuge Complex and Regional planning staff will begin developing different management alternatives that address the various themes that emerge through public involvement. Once alternatives have been identified, we will begin work on a draft CCP and an Environmental Impact Statement that examines the impacts of the proposed management direction. Once draft documents are prepared, we will make copies available and we will again ask for public comment.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge Complex
51 East 4th Street, Room 101
Winona, MN 55987

December 2002
Comprehensive Conservation Plan Update
National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Upper Mississippi River

NEWS *from the National Wildlife Refuge System*

